



United States Coast Guard

# War of 1812

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*Revenue Cutter Operations and the Core Coast Guard Missions*

# Cementing Coast Guard Core Missions: Revenue Cutter Operations in the War of 1812

Today, the United States Coast Guard supports nearly a dozen humanitarian, defense security and law enforcement missions. While the Coast Guard has adopted many of these missions over the course of its long history, several existed in the first twenty years of the revenue cutters' service, when the fleet numbered less than twenty vessels. During the War of 1812, the revenue cutters protected American commerce and enforced trade legislation, but they also performed defense and combat missions that were essential to the war effort and adopted permanently after the conflict.

## Maritime Protection of the New Republic

Considered the founder of the United States Coast Guard, Alexander Hamilton became the first Secretary of the Treasury in 1789 and, on April 22, 1790, he submitted a request to Congress to build sea-going vessels to enforce tariffs and trade legislation. On August 4, 1790, Congress passed Secretary Hamilton's request for these revenue cutters, marking the "birth" of the Coast Guard.

This new federal maritime fleet had no official name, so officials called it "the cutters" or "system of cutters." The fledgling federal government disbanded the Continental Navy in 1785 and Congress did not allow for a navy initially under the Constitution, so between 1790 and 1798 these cutters were the only federal vessels protecting the coast, trade and maritime interests of the new republic. This is the reason for the Coast Guard's status as the United States' oldest, continuous sea service.

## Peacetime Missions of the Revenue Cutters

The cutters were the primary defense against attempts to circumvent customs duties, the new nation's only source of income besides the sale of public lands.

The various peacetime tasks specifically assigned to the cutters included boarding incoming and outgoing vessels and checking their papers; sealing cargo holds of incoming vessels; and seizing those vessels in violation of the law. In addition, the cutters deterred smuggling. Some smugglers tried to unload their cargoes directly on shore out of sight of major ports, while others loaded their goods on smaller "coaster" vessels outside of busy harbors. The cutters interdicted this illegal trade by sailing out of their homeports and catching the smugglers operating off shore and outside the harbors.

Soon the government assigned the service more missions not related to law enforcement including: enforcing quarantine restrictions; charting the local coastline; transporting official passengers and papers; and carrying supplies to lighthouses. During this period, rescuing or assisting mariners in distress on the high seas fell unofficially upon the revenue cutter fleet since the cutters patrolled U.S. waters regularly and responded to strandings and disasters at sea.



*Portrait of Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the Treasury and founder of the Coast Guard's predecessor service of the Revenue Cutter Service (Department of Treasury).*

## Pre-War Neutrality and Enforcing the Embargo

In the 1790s and early 1800s, Great Britain and France fought a succession of wars that threatened American neutrality on the high seas. During this period, British ships boarded United States vessels and impressed American seamen into the Royal Navy, while French privateers preyed on American merchant vessels. The United States did its best to remain neutral, but despite these efforts, the conflict managed to draw the young nation into the struggle. During the late 1790s, in the Quasi War with France, revenue cutters comprised one-third of the American naval fleet. For much of the war, these heavily armed cutters served under the control and direction of the U.S. Navy, which Congress re-established in 1798. This marked the first of many conflicts in which the revenue cutters performed combat duties.

After the Quasi War concluded in 1800, the United States tried to remain neutral, but Britain and France continued to violate American sovereignty on the high seas. Presidents Jefferson and Madison used economic pressure to enforce U.S. neutrality by enacting a series of embargoes and trade restrictions. These included the Non-Importation Act (1806), Embargo Acts (1807-08), Enforcement Act (1809), Non-Intercourse Act (1809-1810), and Macon's Bill Number 2 (1810). The revenue cutters had to enforce these unpopular laws, that put thousands of Americans out of work. The government eventually repealed the restrictive acts, but these trade measures contributed to mounting tensions between the



United States and Great Britain.

By late 1811, conflict appeared imminent and the federal government began preparations for war. In early 1812, however, President Madison and Congress tried one last time to resolve their issues with the British through diplomacy and trade restrictions. Between February and July, Congress passed five acts targeting trade with the British. These trade restrictions required the revenue cutters to board, inspect, detain and, when necessary, seize offending merchant vessels.

### War is Declared and Cutter Operations Begin

After a concerted effort to maintain its neutrality, the United States could no longer avoid involvement in the European conflict. On June 18, 1812, President James Madison signed a declaration of war against Great Britain and the war officially began. At that time, the United States faced the Royal Navy's 600 ships with 16 navy vessels, a fleet of small navy gunboats, 14 cutters and a number of smaller revenue boats.

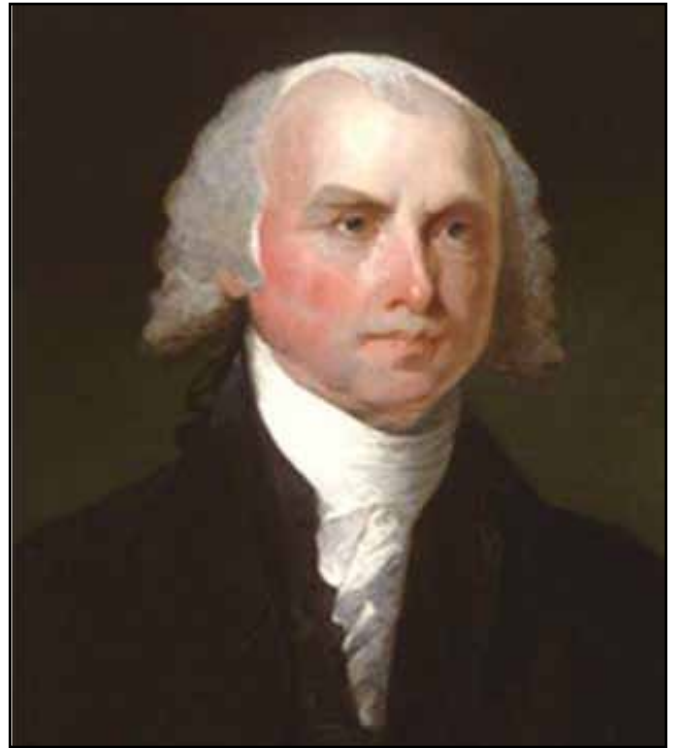
On the day President Madison signed the declaration of war, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin sent a one-sentence circular to all of his customs collectors, who oversaw the revenue cutters, writing, "*Sir, I hasten to inform you that War was this day declared against Great Britain.*" He then ordered revenue cutters stationed along the East Coast to dispatch the news to underway U.S. Navy vessels.

While heavily armed American privateers and warships carried out a war against British ships on the high seas, a domestic maritime force of revenue cutters, navy gunboats and a few trapped American warships waged war against British ships stationed off the East Coast. This defensive force did their best to beat back British privateers, Royal Navy warships and the barges they deployed for shallow water operations; and this defensive force did its best to protect American merchant shipping. The diminutive revenue cutters would serve as frontline units protecting American ports and shipping against enemy patrols and Royal Navy squadrons.

### Patrolling the Front Lines: *Commodore Barry* and the Canadian Frontier

During the war, revenue cutters pursued their primary mission of interdicting smugglers. The busiest areas for this mission included the Gulf Coast around New Orleans, the border area between Georgia and Spanish Florida, and the U.S. border with Canada. To deal with smuggling between Canada and Maine, the Treasury Department relied on cutters, such as the *Commodore Barry*.

Purchased in Long Island in March 1812, the *Commodore Barry* began service in the spring under the command of Maine revenue cutter master Daniel Elliott. Over the summer months, the *Barry* patrolled the Passamaquoddy District of Maine, located along the border with Canada. The revenue cutter apprehended numerous smuggling vessels and brought them into port for adjudication by the local courts. On June 27, 1812, *Commodore Barry* seized the schooner *Cranberry* for carrying British goods in Maine waters. The next day, the *Barry* escorted the *Cranberry* along with detained schooners



**President James Madison tried to use diplomacy and economic pressure to avoid open conflict, but he ultimately signed the declaration of war on June 18, 1812 (National Portrait Gallery).**

*Theresa* and *Rising Sun* from Eastport, Maine, back to Portland. Just a day after arriving in Portland, *Commodore Barry* detained the schooner *Nymph* for carrying an illegal cargo. By August 2, 1812, the revenue cutter had apprehended five smuggling vessels and, five days later, a local court adjudicated the cases of three more vessels seized by the *Barry* for carrying illegal British cargoes.

### First to Fight: Early Captures and Battles

As they would in future American conflicts, the revenue cutters went in harm's way and participated in some of the first encounters of the war. On June 25, 1812, Norfolk-based cutter *Thomas Jefferson* captured the British schooner *Patriot* bound from Guadeloupe to Halifax with a cargo of sugar. This was the first maritime capture during the War of 1812. On July 4, 1812, according to at least one source, cutter *Surveyor* also captured a British brig bound from the Caribbean.

Similar to the region between Canada and Maine on the northern border, the frontier area between Spanish Florida and the State of Georgia became an area where British ships transferred illegal cargoes to smugglers that transported the goods across the U.S. border. Before and during the war, Amelia Island, near St. Augustine, became a center for receiving these British goods. On July 5, 1812, *James Madison* detained the British schooner *Wade* at Amelia Island after its capture by navy gunboats. The ship's cargo included pineapples, turtles and 20,000 dollars in gold.

Early in the war, revenue cutter master George Brooks armed and manned the cutter *James Madison* in a manner

similar to heavily armed American privateers. Built in 1807 in Baltimore, the cutter *James Madison* originally served in that port before taking up station in Savannah in 1809. At eighty-six feet in length on deck and twenty-two feet wide, *Madison* was one of the largest of the revenue cutters. On July 17, 1812, Brooks announced he was departing Charleston to chase six British unescorted merchantmen up the coast from Jamaica and, on July 23, 1812, the *Madison* captured the 300-ton British brig *Shamrock* after an eight-hour chase. Bound from London to Amelia Island with a cargo of arms and ammunition, *Shamrock* carried six cannon and a crew of sixteen men. In addition, on August 1, *Madison* captured the Spanish brig *Santa Rosa*, near Amelia Island, and brought it to Savannah for adjudication.

Under the command of former U.S. Navy captain, master Daniel McNeill, the cutter *Gallatin* also enjoyed early success in capturing British merchantmen bound for Spanish Florida. On August 1, 1812, *Gallatin* captured the British brig *General Blake* sailing from London to Amelia Island, and brought it to Charleston for adjudication. The British ship flew Spanish colors and carried an illegal cargo including African slaves.

### **Commodore Barry and the Battle of Little River**

During the course of the war, revenue cutters pursued

their missions in American waters despite regular patrols by units of the Royal Navy. For example, during the summer of 1812, a British squadron comprised of the 38-gun frigate HMS *Spartan*, 36-gun frigate HMS *Maidstone*, 18-gun brig HMS *Indian* and 12-gun brig HMS *Plumper* patrolled off the Maine coast near the Canadian border. The first battle pitting a revenue cutter against Royal Navy forces took place between the cutter *Commodore Barry* and elements of this squadron.

By the beginning of August 1812, the *Commodore Barry* had rounded up five smuggling vessels and was escorting them back to the customs house for adjudication. On August 2, Master Daniel Elliott learned of a Royal Navy patrol and heard distant gunfire as the British captured American vessels not far from his anchorage. For self-defense, Elliott anchored next to the American armed privateer *Madison* in the harbor of Little River, Maine, east of Machias. Anticipating a British attack, the Americans beached their vessels and set up shore batteries behind defenses improvised from cordwood. On August 3, the British sent in five armed barges with approximately 250 officers and men to attack the small American force. The British paid dearly for the attack, suffering several dead and wounded, but they carried the day.

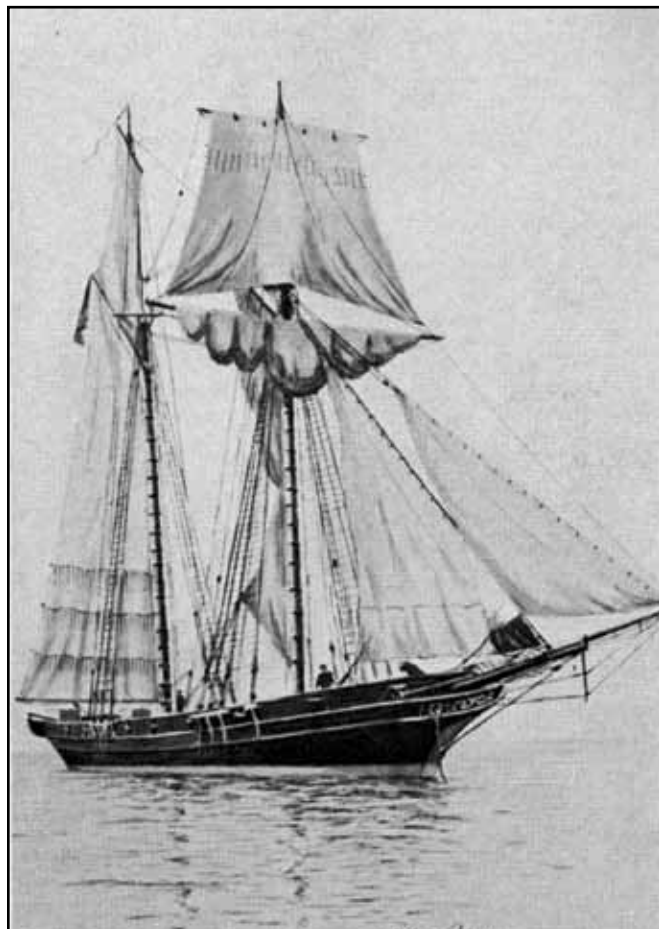
All but three of the cutter's crew escaped into the woods, and these three cuttermen became the first POWs in U.S. Coast Guard history. The British took the three men to Halifax, where they became the first revenue cuttermen incarcerated at the British military prison on Melville Island.

After the battle, the cutter's Royal Navy captors refloated the cutter and sailed it to Saint John, New Brunswick. Local authorities there had been searching for a vessel to protect local merchant shipping from American privateers and purchased the *Barry* to fill that role. Saint John authorities fitted out the former cutter, re-named it *Brunswick* and sailed it until July 4, 1815, when they sold the vessel.

### **James Madison and Guerre de Course Tactics at sea**

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the French developed a naval strategy termed *guerre de course* that relied on warships and armed vessels to attack enemy merchant shipping. Not a mandated mission of the Treasury Department's cutters during the war, only the *James Madison* pursued this strategy. To increase the offensive capability of the *Madison*, Master George Brooks added four extra cannon to the standard cutter armament of six guns, increasing the cutter's armament to ten guns, including carronades. Brooks also more than tripled the cutter's complement of fifteen men to support boarding operations and accommodate prize crews for captured vessels. Brooks had turned the *Madison* into a tool for carrying out *guerre de course* tactics against the enemy.

On August 13, 1812, *James Madison* set sail on a cruise out of Savannah in company with privateers *Paul Jones* and *Spencer*, to prey on British merchantmen. By August 22, *James Madison* located a British convoy and attacked that night, mistaking the 32-gun frigate HMS *Barbadoes* for a large merchantman. According to reports, Brooks ordered the



**A modern rendering of becalmed Cutter James Madison (Coast Guard Collection).**



**Cutter James Madison captures the armed British brig Shamrock on July 23, 1812 (Coast Guard Collection).**

cutter to fire several guns and attempted to board the British frigate before realizing his mistake. For seven hours afterward, the *Barbadoes* chased the *Madison*, which jettisoned two guns to escape, but the wind eventually died. The frigate finally captured the cutter after deploying barges to tow the enemy warship to the cutter's position. *Barbadoes's* captain, Thomas Huskisson, noted that he had already chased *Madison* once before and complimented the cutter on its fast sailing qualities.

After the capture of the *James Madison*, another convoy escort and a ship-of-the-line, HMS *Polyphemus*, sent a prize crew of officers and twenty men on board *Madison* to sail the cutter to England. On its arrival, the Royal Navy chose not to take possession of the *Madison* and, on June 16, 1813, the ex-*James Madison* was sold to the second Earl of Belmore of Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. He had the masts and sails reconfigured into a brig rig, converted the cutter into an armed yacht and re-named the vessel *Osprey*.

On October 7, 1812, *James Madison's* captors formally designated the cuttermen as "prisoners of war" and processed the men for parole or internment. The British paroled the officers and, on November 24, 1812, the *Madison's* officers arrived by ship at New York. The British sent nine enlisted men to Halifax and four of them to Boston. They placed the rest of the enlisted crew in prison at Chatham, England. Four men considered black slaves were captured with *Madison* as well as three men described as "mulatto," who were considered free "men of color." A member of the latter group, fifteen-year-old Beloner Paul of Savannah ranks as the youngest POW in the history of the U.S. Coast Guard. On May 28, 1813, *Madison* seaman John Barber (or Bearbere)

died on board the British hospital ship *Le Pegase* at Chatham. He is considered the first Coast Guardsman to die in captivity.

### **Law Enforcement in Wartime: Cutters *Thomas Jefferson*, *Gallatin* and *Eagle***

During the war, the revenue cutters did not operate under the direction of the navy, as they had during the Quasi War with France. Instead, the cutters took their orders from the Department of Treasury through the local customs collector and the Treasury Department did not sanction high seas revenue cutter combat operations. Treasury still required cutters to enforce tariffs and trade laws, and protect American maritime commerce, so the number of enemy ships taken should not be the only measure of success of the wartime cutters.

In addition to the Non-Intercourse Act, which was in force throughout the conflict, cutters had to enforce seven additional trade restrictions passed by Congress during the war. American shippers and ship captains would often challenge in court any seizures, forfeitures or detentions of ships they believed to be illegal or wrongful. This meant that wartime cutter officers and crew had to be literate and well versed in the fine print of these numerous trade laws.

Built in Norfolk, Virginia, and commissioned in 1802, the *Thomas Jefferson* serves as a prime example of a revenue cutter enforcing federal maritime laws. The cutter served out of Savannah until 1809, when *James Madison* took up station there and the *Jefferson* returned to Norfolk. Master William Ham worked his way through the junior officer ranks, serving in Norfolk cutters as a mate starting in 1791





**Modern watercolor showing a revenue cutter attacking a British privateer during the War of 1812 (Coast Guard Collection).**

and receiving his master's commission in 1804. Ham commanded the *Jefferson* through the war and several years afterward. While the *Jefferson* detained many vessels entering the Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads, the local newspapers noted only a few cases. For example, on September 2, 1812, the *Jefferson* seized the brigs *Ariadne* and *Rockland* for carrying illegal cargoes and escorted them into Norfolk, Virginia. And, on January 1, 1814, the Baltimore newspaper reported that the *Thomas Jefferson* boarded the schooner *Despatch* and sent it into Norfolk for breaching the embargo.

Built in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1807, the revenue cutter *Gallatin* sailed south to take up station at Charleston. While most cutters had one or, at most, two masters over the course of the war, *Gallatin* had three. Master Daniel McNeill commanded the *Gallatin* until August of 1812, when the Treasury Department transferred the cutter to Norfolk. In July of 1812, Norfolk merchant captain Edward Herbert received a revenue cutter master's commission and took command of *Gallatin* in August, when it arrived in Norfolk. Some of the highlights of *Gallatin*'s brief career in Norfolk included the August 12, 1812, release of the 12-gun schooner HMS *Whiting*, the first naval vessel captured in the war. *Whiting* was on a diplomatic mission at the start of the war, so American authorities ordered its release. On September 2, 1812, *Gallatin* escorted into Norfolk the ship *Tom Hazard*, which carried

an illegal cargo of British goods. And, on October 10, 1812, *Gallatin* detained vessels *Active*, of London, and *Georgiana*, of Liverpool. Herbert remained in command of *Gallatin*, which served together with *Thomas Jefferson*, until *Gallatin* returned to Charleston in October 1812.

The cutter *Eagle* also apprehended both British merchant ships and American merchantmen carrying illegal British cargoes. For example, On August 7, 1812, *Eagle* stopped brig *Harriot* of Bristol, England, and a brig from Liverpool, both bound for New York; and sent them into New London for adjudication. On October 3, 1813, *Eagle* apprehended brigs *Patriot*, *Harriet* and *Ann McLane* and sent them into New Haven laden with illegal British cargoes.

### **Serving on the Southern Frontier: Battling the Smugglers of Barataria Bay**

Smuggling operations focused not only on the U.S. border regions of Canada and Spanish Florida, but also around New Orleans, a city recently acquired by the United States through the Louisiana Purchase. Here smugglers proved very aggressive and their activities verged on the piratical.

The Treasury Department built the revenue cutter *Louisiana* in Baltimore to control smuggling and enforce federal laws on shipping flowing through the port of New Orleans. A Baltimore shipyard completed the cutter in December

of 1804 and it set sail for Louisiana that same month. The cutter's master and commander, Angus Frazer, received his commission in 1810 and took command later that year.

In a strange twist of fate, the *Louisiana* was lost in a severe hurricane on August 11, 1812. The cutter capsized at the port of New Orleans with the loss of all hands except Master Angus Frazer. On September 27, 1813, nearly a year after the cutter's loss, Acting Treasury Secretary William Jones wrote the New Orleans customs collector, "*It is not thought advisable during the continuance of the existing state of things to authorize the procuring of another Revenue Cutter . . .*" The New Orleans station would remain without another cutter until after the war.

Despite the loss of his cutter, Captain Frazer served in conjunction with navy and army units to curtail waterborne smuggling into New Orleans. On October 10, 1812, he commanded an armed party and small boat that apprehended armed smugglers and their delivery boat near Barataria Bay. The smugglers managed to escape only to return the next day to capture Frazer, his men and the boat. Not bound or tied, Frazer and his men managed to escape the smugglers on Sunday night, but their captors pressed on to New Orleans to sell their illegal goods. A local newspaper described the struggle with the smugglers as "*perhaps the most impudent daring act of smuggling, ever attempted in the U[nited] States*".

#### **Port and Coastal Security: Cutters *Gallatin*, *Massachusetts* and *Diligence***

Under orders from the local customs collector, each revenue cutter took responsibility for the security of its homeport and surrounding coastal waters. Cutters *Massachusetts*, *Gallatin* and *Diligence* proved worthy examples of cutters securing their respective East Coast ports. Built in Wilmington, North Carolina, the cutter *Diligence* received its commission in 1807. The vessel was the fourth of six cutters to bear the name and called Wilmington home like the other cutters named *Diligence*. The cutter's master and commander was Joseph Burch, an officer who received a mate's commission in 1797 and became a revenue cutter master in 1809. He served as captain of *Diligence* throughout the War of 1812.

Based in Charleston, South Carolina, cutter *Gallatin* patrolled, or "cruised," the coastal waters between Savannah and Charleston and served for a time out of Norfolk, Virginia. On October 25, 1812, *Gallatin* departed Charleston on a cruise under newly commissioned master John Hubbard Silliman. On November 7, 1812, *Gallatin* joined famed privateer *Saucy Jack* to hunt the British privateer *Caledonia* off the coast of Charleston. They returned empty handed. On March 31, 1813, *Gallatin* arrived in Charleston after a five-day cruise from Savannah and reported to authorities the location of Royal Navy warships sailing off Port Royal, South Carolina.

In addition to the loss of the *Louisiana* due to a catastrophic hurricane, human error caused the destruction of the cutter *Gallatin*. On April 1, 1813, at 11:00am in the morning, while *Gallatin*'s crew cleaned the ship's muskets, the powder

room exploded and blew off the cutter's stern and quarter-deck, killing three crewmembers and seriously wounding five more. The cutter sank immediately at its anchorage several yards off Blake's Wharf in Charleston Harbor. Captain Silliman was on shore when the accident occurred.

Commissioned in 1801, the *Massachusetts* sailed under the command of famed Revolutionary War privateer, and one of the original revenue cutter captains, John Foster Williams. Like many of the cutters, *Massachusetts* was sixty feet long on deck and about eighteen feet wide. *Massachusetts* was the third cutter to bear the name and patrolled the port of Boston and local coastal area. On June 18, 1812, Treasury Secretary Gallatin ordered the *Massachusetts* dispatched to the Passamaquoddy District of Maine, near the border with Canada, to notify locals of the declaration of war with Great Britain. On May 10, 1813, the *Massachusetts* stopped a schooner carrying papers to sail for Halifax, discovered illegal correspondence and returned one illegal passenger to Boston. On June 24, 1814, seventy-year-old John Foster Williams died of natural causes while still in command of the *Massachusetts*.

#### **The British Blockade the East Coast**

Within a month of the war's declaration, in June 1812, Royal Navy squadrons began patrolling off the Eastern Seaboard. There were local cases of Royal Navy blockades, such



**A War of 1812 illustration showing larger units of the Royal Navy supporting an attack against the U.S. mainland (Library of Congress).**

as the ports in South Carolina and Georgia in November of 1812. However, over the course of the war, the Royal Navy gradually tightened a blockade around all major ports along the nation's East Coast.

The British Admiralty began the blockade on November 27, 1812, sending orders to Admiral John Warren, commander-in-chief of the North American Station, to blockade the Chesapeake and Delaware bays. Probably due to winter conditions and the cessation of the sailing season, Warren did not begin enforcement of the orders until February 1813. On February 4, a British fleet under Rear Admiral George Cockburn anchored in Hampton Roads, Virginia, to begin a close blockade of the Chesapeake Bay. In response, on March 15, 1813, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin ordered the Norfolk customs collector to “*immediately extinguish*” the lights and remove the lamps, oil and “*other moveable apparatus*” in all lighthouses located in the Chesapeake Bay “*for the purpose of preventing the enemy again putting up the lights.*” In the spring, the Royal Navy began a campaign of attacking and burning Chesapeake's coastal towns, such Maryland's Havre de Grace, Georgetown and Fredericktown. This campaign of coastal attacks and infiltration served to cut off local commerce and shipping.

Next, on March 30, 1813, Admiral Warren extended the blockade beyond the Delaware and Chesapeake bays, adding the major American port cities of New York, Charleston, Port Royal (South Carolina), Savannah and New Orleans. By summer, the blockade closed in around Southern ports and, on September 15, 1813, a British officer landed at Ocracoke, North Carolina, under a white flag and delivered to the deputy customs collector a notice declaring Ocracoke “*and all others of note to the southward of this, in a state of blockade.*” The officer also noted that the Royal Navy had sealed off ports as far north as Boston. By October 17, 1813, the British 18-gun brig HMS *Recruit* also instituted a close blockade of Wilmington, North Carolina.

### **The British in Hampton Roads and the *Thomas Jefferson***

The Norfolk-based cutter *Thomas Jefferson* distinguished itself many times during the war, such as in April 1813. The enforcement of a tight blockade of the Chesapeake Bay early in 1813 saw Royal Navy warships and their armed barges patrolling parts of the Hampton Roads area in search of unlucky American merchantmen.

These armed barge patrols would meet their match on April 11, 1813, in the James River. On that day, cutter *Thomas Jefferson* together with a pilot boat and a contingent of local militiamen caught three Royal Navy barges. The armed barges attempted to escape up the James, but the *Thomas Jefferson* ran them down so fast that the flotilla hove to. Just as Captain William Ham was about to order his gunners to fire a broadside, the British commander ordered the white flag displayed and surrendered. Ham ordered the nearly sixty British officers and men ashore under an armed guard of about forty riflemen. The cutter and militiamen also repatriated the crew of the American merchantman *Flight*, captured earlier by the Royal Navy barges.

Cutter *Thomas Jefferson* had fulfilled its mission to protect Americans against enemy operations. However, while the revenue cutters experienced successes such as these during the British blockade of the Chesapeake, they were still vulnerable to attack in waters outside the safety of their homeports.

### ***Surveyor* and the Battle of Gloucester Point**

The British blockade of the East Coast had brought the naval war to home shores, especially in the Chesapeake Bay. On June 12, 1813, Captain Samuel Travis anchored the Cutter *Surveyor* off Gloucester Point, near Yorktown, Virginia. Not knowing the proximity of British naval forces to his cutter, Captain Travis set out a picket boat with a small crew and installed boarding nets around the cutter's deck. The customs collector for the port of Baltimore built the cutter



*Customs flintlock pistol from 1810 similar to those used by cuttermen during the War of 1812 (Coast Guard Collection).*





**Battle for the Surveyor showing the vastly outnumbered cutter crew defending their ship on June 12, 1813 (Coast Guard Collection).**

*Surveyor* to serve the Baltimore station and commissioned it in 1807; however, during the British blockade, the cutter served in the southern Chesapeake Bay. The cutter measured sixty-eight feet on deck, nineteen feet wide, and drew about six feet of water; and it carried a crew of about twenty-five officers and men, and the usual cutter armament of six six-pound cannon.

At about midnight that evening, barges carrying a party of over fifty British officers and men from the 32-gun frigate HMS *Narcissus* approached through the evening haze with muffled oars. They managed to close within 150 yards of the cutter before the picket boat detected them and fired a warning shot. The British navigated their barges away from *Surveyor*'s main armament of six-pound carronades, rendering the cutter's guns ineffective; so Travis armed each man with two muskets and ordered them to wait until the British rowed within about fifty yards, when he would give the word to fire. The *Surveyor*'s crew of eighteen fought stubbornly, killing three attackers and wounding seven more. However, the British boarding party managed to gain the cutter's deck, overwhelmed the outnumbered crew and captured the cutter.

The lieutenant in charge of the attacking flotilla returned Travis's sword, which had been given as a sign of surrender, commending him for the valiant defense of his ship in the face of overwhelming enemy forces: "*Your gallant and desperate attempt to defend your vessel against more than*

*double your number excited such admiration on the part of your opponents as I have seldom witnessed, and induced me to return you the sword you had so ably used...I am at a loss which to admire most, the previous arrangement on board the Surveyor or the determined manner in which her deck was disputed inch-by-inch.*"

The battle of the *Surveyor* proved one of the most hotly contested revenue cutter engagements of the war. Ironically, on June 19, 1813, a week after the fight, the Baltimore customs collector wrote that the seven-year-old *Surveyor* "*was an old vessel, scarcely worth repairing.*" Within days, the British fleet occupying Hampton Roads would land troops at Hampton, Virginia, and sack the city using the captured cutter ex-*Surveyor* to help cover the landings. The ultimate fate of the gallant cutter is still unknown.

After the battle, Captain Samuel Travis and his crew found themselves prisoners on board the British 44-gun frigate HMS *Junon*.

*Surveyor*'s two officers and 16 enlisted men were sent to a British military prison at Halifax. Captain Travis would fare better, with the British paroling him at Washington, North Carolina, on August 7, 1813. Travis returned to Virginia after his release and lived in Williamsburg for much of the remainder of his life.



**Cutter Vigilant attacks and captures the enemy privateer Dart of Block Island on October 4, 1813 (Coast Guard Collection).**

### **“Brown Water” Operations: *Mercury* Foils the Invasion of North Carolina**

It was during the War of 1812 that revenue cutters undertook new missions and established their reputation as effective shallow water, or “brown water,” naval vessels. The sailing warships of the U.S. Navy were too large to enter many inland waterways of the American coastline; however, revenue cutters were intended to catch smugglers in coastal waters and proved effective in navigating such areas.

During the British invasion of the North Carolina coast, the revenue cutter *Mercury* proved the value of small maneuverable vessels in these shallow sounds and inland waterways. Homeported in the city of New Bern, North Carolina, *Mercury* was perfect for operating in North Carolina’s shallow coastal waters. The cutter’s master, David Wallace, came from a prominent family from the state’s Outer Banks and he had an intimate knowledge of the coast. By late May 1813, the British blockade began to encircle the Southern port cities, including Ocracoke, North Carolina. Located next to a channel through the Outer Banks that served as the entrance to North Carolina’s inland sounds, Ocracoke proved easy prey for British attackers. On May 21, the brazen British privateer *Venus of Bermuda*, attempted a surprise attack on cutter *Mercury* and American vessels anchored at Ocracoke. The local inhabitants detected the plot and raised an alarm

before the British privateer could spring its trap. The enemy raider managed to escape and searched for easier prey sailing offshore.

In mid-summer a more ominous threat loomed on the horizon, as a Royal Navy squadron appeared off Ocracoke. On July 12, 1813, the cutter *Mercury* saved the day after the squadron launched a surprise attack. Fifteen armed barges, supporting approximately 1,000 British officers and enlisted men, captured two American privateer brigs, but *Mercury* managed to escape with the local customs house papers and bonds by “*crowding upon her every inch of canvas she had, and by cutting away her long boat.*” The British had hoped to take the cutter, so their barge flotilla could enter Pamlico Sound and capture the city of New Bern. *Mercury* thwarted those plans by outrunning the barges, sailing quickly to New Bern and warning city officials of probable attack by British troops. *Mercury*’s early warning allowed locals the time to muster the necessary army and militia forces to defend the city and the British reversed their invasion plans. Afterward, *Mercury* remained active in North Carolina waters. On November 12, 1814, the cutter captured the ship *Fox*, used as a tender by ship-of-the-line HMS *Ramilles*, and delivered to New Bern the vessel and its crew of a Royal Navy midshipman and seven enlisted men.

## ***Vigilant* Defeats the Hated Privateer *Dart***

To keep regional waters secure for American commerce also meant fighting British privateers that patrolled off East Coast ports and preyed on American merchantmen. Fights between cutters and privateers occurred regularly and included the battle between *Vigilant* and the British privateer *Dart*.

This engagement was one of the most impressive captures of an enemy ship by a revenue cutter. It involved the sloop *Dart*, formerly an American ship captured by the British and converted into an enemy privateer. The heavily armed raider carried one twelve, two nine and two six-pound cannon, as well as four swivel guns. By October 1813, *Dart* had amassed an impressive capture record of over twenty American merchantmen. Similar to other cutters, the *Vigilant* measured sixty feet on deck and nineteen feet wide and carried an armament of six cannon. The cutter had a crew of 17 and its master, John Cahoon, came from a prominent ship-ping family of Newport, Rhode Island.

News of the privateer arrived in Newport on October 4, 1813, so Captain Cahoon prepared the cutter for a fight and raised an armed contingent of local militia to supplement the cutter's crew for boarding and sailing home any captured vessels. *Vigilant* sailed out of Newport and located *Dart* that evening off the east end of Block Island. Cahoon pursued the armed privateer and ordered *Vigilant's* cannon fired at the raider. After firing his cannon, Cahoon steered the cutter alongside the privateer and *Vigilant's* boarding party chased the privateer's crew below decks and took the ship.

Cahoon's prize crew sailed *Dart* back to Newport after the battle. This would not be the last vessel captured by *Vigilant*, but it proved to be the last successful use of boarding by a revenue cutter in the Age of Sail.

## **Cutter Operations with the United States Navy**

During the war, the Treasury Department did not officially sanction the use of cutters for combat missions against British convoys or ship-to-ship actions with units of the Royal Navy. On the other hand, revenue cutters did operate together with units and flotillas of the U.S. Navy. One of the more active cutters to operate with navy vessels was the *New Hampshire*. The Treasury Department commissioned the cutter in 1803 and Master William Parker Adams commanded it through most of 1812. By the end of the year, the Portsmouth customs collector replaced Adams with first mate Nathaniel Kennard, who commanded the cutter for the rest of the war. In 1813, the *New Hampshire* operated temporarily with Commodore Isaac Hull's flotilla of USS *Enterprise*, USS *Rattlesnake* and two navy gunboats, based out of Portsmouth. On November 3, the cutter sailed out of Portsmouth with the flotilla in pursuit of two Royal Navy brigs. The flotilla eventually returned to port after it appeared that the brigs were setting a trap with an enemy frigate waiting offshore. In the summer of 1814, Captain Kennard commanded the cutter when, together with the navy's *Gunboat 88*, *New Hampshire* captured the armed tender for the British 38-gun frigate HMS *Tenedos* and an American prize ship the



**War of 1812 vintage painting of a revenue cutter and British brig (Peabody Essex Museum Collection).**

tender had captured.

Other cutters served temporarily with units of the U.S. Navy. On August 25, 1812, the *General Greene* and navy gunboats stopped and boarded the ship *Superior* loaded with illegal British goods. During the summer of 1813, the cutter *Active* sailed through the British squadron blockading Commodore Stephen Decatur's flotilla of USS *United States*, USS *Macedonian*, and USS *Hornet* on the Thames River, near New London. Cutter *Active* provided force protection for Decatur's warships and delivered reports, messages and naval intelligence between Decatur's flotilla and authorities in New York. In April 1814, Congress recognized this important service partnership by passing "*An Act granting pensions to the officers and seamen serving on board the revenue cutters in certain cases.*" which provided pensions for revenue cuttermen that received wounds in connection with navy operations.

## **Escorting Convoys on the East Coast**

One of the cutters' primary wartime missions was to protect American merchantmen against marauding enemy privateers and Royal Navy warships. After implementation of the British blockade in 1813, this mission became especially important to those coasting vessels navigating the sounds, bays and inland waterways of the East Coast.

A number of revenue cutters carried out the mission of escorting convoys of merchantmen, a revenue cutter tradition established during the Quasi War with France. One of these cutters was the *Active*. Purchased in 1807, the *Active* served out of New York City under the command of master Caleb Brewster. *Eagle* began convoy duties by the middle of 1813 and escorted several convoys from Connecticut ports, such as New London and New Haven, to New York. Typically,



*Active* would escort vessels under cover of night and each convoy consisted of several coasters or merchantmen. Cutter *Eagle*, of New Haven, also kept busy escorting merchantmen in 1813 and 1814. *Eagle*'s convoys generally sailed only between New Haven and New York. The numbers within each of *Eagle*'s convoys ranged from three vessels up to twenty.

### Maritime Interdiction and the Case of the *Fair American*

Unlike U.S. Navy vessels, revenue cutters regularly boarded merchant vessels to enforce maritime laws. This maritime interdiction role often exposed criminal activity, such as smuggling, defrauding the government and failing to observe federal laws and legislation.

One such case occurred on January 22, 1814, near Sandy Hook, New Jersey, when a boarding party from the cutter *Active* inspected the merchant ship *Fair American*, which had special papers to sail for Liverpool, England. In what became a rather sensational story at the time, Caleb Brewster's crew found eleven men with no passports concealed in the ship's hold and several men of wealth disguised as seamen. They caught others among the crew trying to destroy illegal documents. *Active*'s boarding party found bills, orders, and drafts for supplying the Royal Navy and the British military in Canada and the West Indies and arrested a number of passengers, including two smuggled British POWs.

### Rescue Operations during the War

During the war, the revenue cutters carried on the tradition of rescue and life saving. The revenue cutters had supported this role since the establishment of the fleet. Rescuing mariners in distress has always been a tradition of the sea, and since the revenue cutters regularly patrolled U.S. waters, it frequently fell upon the cutters to perform this humanitarian service.

While revenue cutters likely performed numerous rescues during the conflict, newspapers and journals only recognized a few of them. On August 12, 1812, the crew of Portsmouth-based cutter *New Hampshire* rescued five out of seven American privateersmen whose small boat capsized in severe weather at Winter Harbor, Maine.

In November of that year, newspapers noted a rescue in Philadelphia, where members of *General Greene*'s crew used axes to cut open the bow of the brig *Rattlesnake*, which had capsized during a severe storm. The cuttermen saved eighteen men and one boy, who all nearly died after spending four hours in chin-deep water with limited air. That same month, *Diligence* rescued survivors of the American brig *Defiance*, bound from New York to Savannah. The vessel had capsized in a violent storm, drowning three passengers and washing the vessel ashore near Wilmington, North Carolina. The cuttermen rescued the survivors, helped save some of the brig's cargo and assisted in burying the dead.

### Master Daniel Elliott Fights on the Canadian Border

As with *Louisiana*'s master Angus Frazer, Master Daniel Elliott continued to serve as the primary customs naval officer for his district even after the loss of his revenue cutter,



**A rare miniature portrait of Captain Frederick Lee. This is the only contemporary illustration of a cutter captain known to exist (Madison Historical Society, Madison, Conn.).**

the *Commodore Barry*.

After the capture of the *Barry*, Elliott took command of the smaller, but swift revenue boat *Income*, stationed out of Machias, Maine. By September of 1813, the newspapers reported that the revenue boat had captured a former prize ship captured by the British privateer *Dart* and sent to Halifax. The captured schooner had a British prize crew on board, except for one remaining American, who piloted the schooner through thick fog to the patrolling revenue boat. In February 1814, while sailing off Jonesport, Maine, Elliott encountered the British privateer *Hare of St. Johns*. Elliott beached the *Income* at nearby Sawyer Cove and his crew took cover with small arms. An armed landing party rowed from the privateer to shore to seize the revenue boat. With the aid of local militiamen, Elliott's crew killed one and wounded two of the British landing party before the enemy escaped back to the privateer. In addition, on March 4, 1814, Elliott took possession of British prize vessel *Porpoise* from the American privateer *Nonsuch* and sent the captured vessel to Machias for adjudication.

### On the Front Lines in the Great Lakes

In the early nineteenth century, the Treasury Department stationed customs collectors at ports on the Great Lakes, such as Detroit, and Buffalo and Rochester, New York. During the war, these port cities were on the front lines of the



**Modern painting illustrating the gallant defense of Cutter Eagle (Coast Guard Collection).**

conflict between opposing forces in the U.S. and Canada. For example, on July 13, 1812, Genesee District customs collector Caleb Hopkins wrote from Rochester, N.Y., to Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, “*The shores being lined with Soldiers has induced me to dismiss all of my Deputies . . .*”

Early in the nineteenth century, the port cities dotting the shores of the Great Lakes were too small to merit a revenue cutter, so most used “revenue boats,” small schooners generally no more than half the size of a standard revenue cutter. These boats became easy targets for British attacks on the American ports. On July 19, 1812, a British squadron from Lake Ontario, including the 20-gun sloop HMS *Royal George* and the 16-gun ship HMS *Prince Regent* entered Sacket’s Harbor, New York, and captured its revenue boat. The British kept the boat as a prize and returned the crew to Sacket’s Harbor. On July 21, 1812, the HMS *Prince Regent* trapped the revenue boat at Ogdensburg, New York. On October 6, 1812, British officers and men on barges launched from the HMS *Royal George* captured the revenue boat stationed near Rochester, New York. On March 15, 1814, the Plattsburgh (New York) *Republican* reported that the revenue boat for Lake Champlain barely escaped the powerful British flotilla unleashed on the lake after the winter ice thawed. And, in May 1814, the Oswego District customs collector Nathan Sage lost his revenue boat to American militia forces that confiscated the vessel to help defend Oswego, New

York, against a British assault.

### **Revenue Cutters Adopt an Intelligence Gathering Mission**

With naval vessels cruising at sea and naval gunboats often stationed in port cities, revenue cutters became an effective maritime intelligence gathering tools. They did their best to monitor enemy naval movements, locate British privateers, and provide news regarding American merchantmen. Because of their speed and agility, the revenue cutters proved the most reliable source of this naval intelligence. Revenue cutter captains gathered and shared this information with customs collectors, local officials, newspapers and military personnel.

Of the revenue cutter masters, *Active*’s captain Caleb Brewster proved the most efficient intelligence gatherer. As member of a spy ring supplying enemy information to General George Washington during the Revolutionary War, Brewster had plenty of experience in gathering military intelligence. On May 26, 1813, a New York newspaper reported that cutter *Active* braved a “strong south gale” near Montauk Point, Long Island, to maintain surveillance of three British men-of-war about ten miles out to sea. Using local small craft, Captain Brewster passed the information to Commodore Stephen Decatur, whose squadron was anchored in Long Island Sound. Brewster continued providing military intelligence to New York officials regarding enemy naval operations until the war’s end.





**A War of 1812 cartoon making fun of British naval defeats by American warships (Library of Congress).**

During the British blockade of Delaware Bay, the primary mission of cutter *General Greene* was to monitor the enemy. Built in 1810, the *General Greene* measured sixty feet on deck with a twenty-one foot width. Master Joseph Sawyer served as an officer on revenue cutters based out of Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware, from 1799 until 1811, when he took command of the *General Greene*. On March 20, 1813, the Wilmington, Delaware, customs collector ordered *General Greene* to observe and report all activities and movements of Royal Navy forces blockading the Delaware Bay. On September 6, 1814, the Committee of Defense for the Delaware River requested Treasury Secretary George Campbell send cutter *General Greene* on daily trips to monitor enemy movements. Within two weeks, the Wilmington customs collector received instructions to send *General Greene* on regular reconnaissance missions in the Delaware Bay. While the *Active* and *General Greene* proved the most notable intelligence gathering revenue cutters, the rest of the cutters also reported important military intelligence, such as numbers and positions of enemy ships, landing of troops, and provisioning of enemy vessels.

### **Gallant Defense of the *Eagle***

Built in Connecticut in 1809, the cutter *Eagle* had a design similar to several wartime revenue cutters, including dimensions of sixty feet long on deck and eighteen feet wide, and it carried six six-pound cannon. Connecticut native Frederick Lee, one of the most noted revenue cutter captains at that time, commanded *Eagle* out of its home port of New Haven, Connecticut. On May 30, 1814, Captain Lee learned that the British privateer *Liverpool Packet* had just captured a locally owned sloop outside New Haven Harbor.

Lee brought on board *Eagle* forty-four volunteer militiamen and pursued the British privateer along with another armed vessel. *Eagle* and its consort were forced to turn back after sighting a British frigate and two other enemy warships lying off the harbor.

On October 10, 1814, news arrived in New Haven that a privateer in Long Island Sound had captured an American merchantmen. Captain Lee showed no hesitation in pursuing the enemy. He assembled local militia to join his cutter and sailed into the night to re-capture the American vessel and take the British vessel as well. The next morning, Lee found his cutter dangerously close to the 18-gun brig HMS *Dispatch* and a tender and managed to escape capture from enemy barges by running the cutter onto the northern shore of Long Island. The cutter's crew and militia stripped the cutter of its sails, dragged *Eagle*'s cannon up the bluffs on shore and dueled with the British warship. After they exhausted their large shot, *Eagle*'s men tore up the ship's logbook to use as wadding and fired back the enemy shot that had lodged in the hull. During the engagement, the British shot away the cutter's flag three times, but crewmembers volunteered to replace it each time. This gun duel ended without a decisive outcome, however, an American captive on board the captured merchantman recounted that the battle badly damaged *Eagle*, which appeared to be a wreck.

After fighting for two days, HMS *Dispatch* departed in search of reinforcements. Meanwhile, Lee patched up and refloated his damaged cutter. However, on October 13, the British gun brig and its tender returned with the 32-gun frigate HMS *Narcissus*. Later that day, the Royal Navy flotilla delivered an overwhelming force of seven armed barges, whose officers and men fell upon Lee's crew and the volun-



teer militia to capture the damaged cutter. Lee later commented: “*The officers and crew, together with the volunteers, on board the cutter, have done their duty as became American sailors.*” *Eagle* was the last cutter lost during the war.

### New Cutter Mission: Transporting Military Cargoes

Best suited to swiftness and agility, revenue cutters provided a multi-mission platform during the war. Beside their primary mission of law enforcement and their newly adopted combat missions, the cutters also delivered sensitive military papers, naval dispatches and treaties. For example, in February 1815, the general in command of American forces in New York sent cutter *Active* out to sea with papers from Secretary of War James Monroe notifying the blockading British squadron that a peace treaty had been signed and hostilities were at an end.

The cutters also transported high-ranking government officials and military personnel. For example, between August 8 and 9, 1812, Cutter *Diligence* transported Major General Thomas Brown and his staff between Wilmington, North Carolina, and his headquarters at nearby Smithville. On November 5, 1812, newspapers reported that General William Hull, governor of Michigan Territory, used a revenue cutter for local travel before his military defeat at the hands of British forces. In addition, on July 30, 1813, cutter *Mercury* carried New Bern militia officers to the Outer Banks to identify islands suitable for erecting new fortifications.

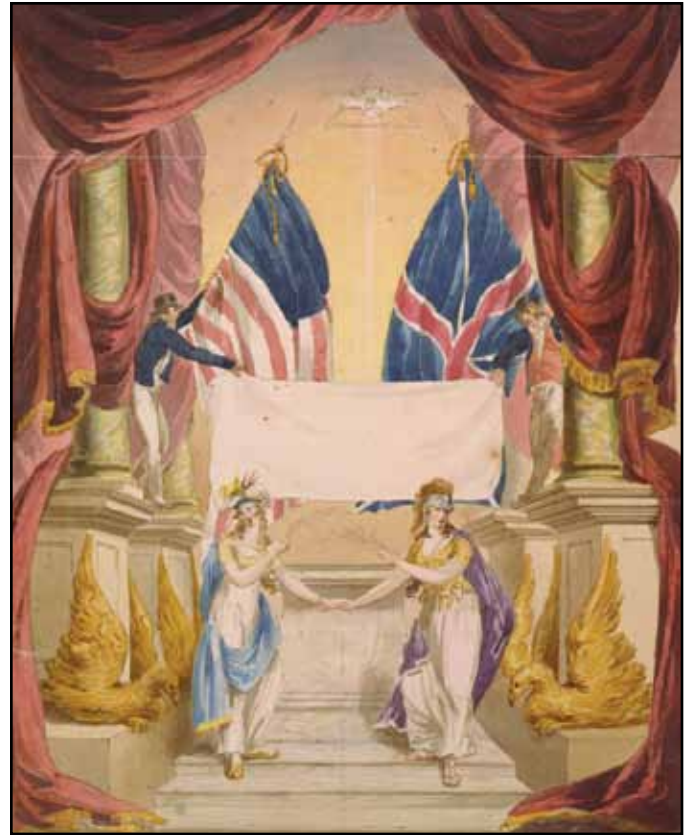
### Peace Treaty and Conclusion of the War

Early in the nineteenth century, correspondents had to communicate by ship or the slower overland routes, so the process of ending the war took months. On Christmas Eve, 1814, representatives of the United States and Great Britain signed the peace treaty, the Treaty of Ghent, at a ceremony in Ghent, Belgium. However, in North America the war continued in full effect until February 1815.

In the period between the treaty’s signing in Ghent and President Madison’s final signature nearly two months later, other developments took place. On January 8, 1815, the Americans commanded by General Andrew Jackson defeated a large British army in the Battle of New Orleans. This was the last major land engagement of the war. On February 4, 1815, Congress passed “*An Act to prohibit intercourse with the enemy, and for other purposes,*” requiring the revenue cutters to enforce yet another trade restriction aimed at cutting off illegal trading with the enemy. On February 11, the 18-gun sloop HMS *Favorite* delivered the peace treaty to New York City under a white flag, however, the war did not officially conclude until President Madison signed the treaty on February 16, 1815.

### War’s Aftermath and the Way Forward

Over the course of February and March 1815, word spread that the war had ended. On March 3, 1815, Congress repealed “*the acts prohibiting the entrance of foreign vessels into the waters of the United States,*” thereby rescinding many of the trade restrictions imposed before and during the



**The illustration “The Peace” drawn after the conclusion of the war (Library of Congress).**

war. In May, Treasury Secretary Alexander Dallas began the process of rebuilding the depleted revenue cutter fleet, writing the New York customs collector about building one or more schooner-rigged cutters to replace those lost in the war.

### Multi-Mission Revenue Cutters in War and Peace

In the early 1790s, the revenue cutters served primarily as a maritime law enforcement fleet, carrying out Alexander Hamilton’s mission to protect American commerce, enforce U.S. trade laws and tariffs, and interdict maritime smuggling. Over the course of the decade, the law enforcement role expanded to include enforcing quarantine restrictions, facilitating the operation of lighthouses and, unofficially, conducting rescue operations. In addition, the Quasi-War with France in the late 1790s demonstrated the effectiveness of heavily armed cutters in high seas combat operations and convoy escort duty.

Before the War of 1812, the revenue cutters already served a multi-mission role in service of the federal government. Nevertheless, the war solidified the cutters’ law enforcement and defense readiness roles and added new missions, including port and coastal security, brown-water combat operations, intelligence gathering and several new naval support missions. ♦

# War of 1812

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## Revenue Cutter Operations and the Core Coast Guard Missions



*Mural image from the Coast Guard Academy showing the defense of Cutter Eagle (Coast Guard Collection).*